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BUSINESS COACHES

GAIL F. GOODMAN: E-MAIL MARKETING

Creating Spam-Free E-Mail

Follow these simple steps to ensure your marketing messages are welcomed by customers and not dismissed as spam.

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We all get spam in our inboxes--unwanted, fraudulent, illegal e-mail from anonymous senders pushing cheap pharmaceuticals, no-questions-asked credit, even pornography. Spammers must think we're all broke, in pain, impotent or worse. No one wants their legitimate commercial e-mail communications to be confused with this junk.

Fortunately the federal government's CAN-SPAM Act of 2004 and the E-Mail Service Provider Coalition (ESPC) are working to squash the problem. Spam filter software helps, too, though it isn't perfect. There are also simple steps you can take to make sure your e-mail gets through to your customers, fostering loyalty to your brand and converting clicks into sales. Do it right, and customers will look forward to your e-mails.

Start by putting yourself in your customers' shoes. Which business e-mails do you read immediately and which do you delete? Look at the e-mail that's currently in your inbox, and ask yourself two key questions:

- Does this e-mail come from someone I know?
- Is the content of this e-mail relevant to me?

Whether they think about it consciously or not, your customers ask the same questions when new e-mail appears in their inboxes. So it's important that your e-mail connects to your customers right away and gives them valuable content, not just a sales pitch. Here are three steps to get to yes on both efforts:

1. Pick a recognizable "From" line. You have mere seconds to get your customers to recognize that your e-mail is from someone they know. To make sure they make that connection, use a name they'll recognize. Incorporate your brand. And be consistent over time so you build up brand recognition.

2. Use a permission reminder. Track where you meet people, whether at a networking event, a conference or a trade show--wherever you meet potential customers. Remind them of your connection upfront in a "permission reminder" statement.

Sample: "You're receiving this message from Gail's Store because you purchased a product, subscribed on our website or requested more information from one of our salespeople. If you no longer wish to receive our e-mails, click to unsubscribe."

And don't wait two months after you meet someone to send that e-mail. While you no doubt made a good impression, they're sure to have forgotten you after two months of no contact.

3. Make the content relevant. Spam is in the eye of the beholder. It's e-mail's empty calories with no value--unless you like reading misspelled words in ALL CAPS. And it's rude and disrespectful. You wouldn't start a phone conversation with, "Hi Gail, I want to sell you something." The same applies to e-mail marketing communications.

Of course you want to sell your product or service. But make sure your e-mail gives readers something of value for free, first, such as a piece of "how to" advice, a coupon or a sales alert for "preferred customers only." Make it news they can use.

A common small-business mistake is to worry about what you want to say instead of what your customers want to learn about. For example, let's say you own a wine store and you're putting one of your great Merlots on sale. Start your e-mail with some free advice, like how to choose a Merlot or which Merlots go great with a summer barbecue. *Then* tell them about your \$15-per-bottle promotion. Engage *before* you sell.

CAN-SPAM's Four Rules

The CAN-SPAM Act has four basic rules for commercial e-mailer compliance. Follow these to make sure your e-mail isn't disregarded as spam. (Besides...it's the law.)

- **Collect e-mail addresses in a straightforward way, providing a clear notice that people are joining your list.** If you're collecting business cards at a trade show, make sure you're clear that by giving you their card, that person is subscribing to your e-mail list. If customers buy from you online, ask after the purchase if they want to subscribe. Don't assume they do. Use a good permission policy to build an opt-in e-mail list.
- **Do not falsify who you are or what you're sending.** You must send your commercial messages with a "From" and "Reply" address that you own and monitor. Your subject line cannot be misleading, and you cannot alter or falsify your header (routing) information. An advertisement must be identified as an advertisement.
- **You must have a working unsubscribe mechanism in all your e-mail campaigns.** Process opt-out requests promptly, and take them off your list within 10 days.
- **Include the physical address of your company in all your e-mails.**

The e-mail marketing industry will continue to work hard on your behalf to put spam in the garbage disposal and to put spammers out of business. You can do your part to make sure your e-mail is always perceived in a positive light.

Go back to those two core questions: Will my customers know who is sending this e-mail? Will they find it interesting and valuable when it gets there? If you can say yes to both, you're ready to hit "Send."

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